

Community Affairs, Committee (SEN)

Educational and Developmental Psychologists

Senate Enquiry –Mental Health,

Dear Senators,

As a psychologist who worked in mainstream and special schools for 19 years, and then specialized in autism spectrum disorders, often in a consultancy role with schools, for a further 18 years, I believe I am in a strong position to advocate for an increase in the numbers of educational and developmental psychologists in our schools.

Regarding prevention, these specialist psychologists have a key role promoting positive mental health through their professional expertise including both via the provision of direct services , and via various collaborative programs (eg NSW School Link – a joint Education and Health Department initiative). Programs such as the example given aim to raise awareness regarding early indicators/risks for mental health issues, and to build resilience. In regard to positive mental health, educational and developmental psychologists have a contribution to make at both the systemic and individual intervention levels.

They have expertise from evidence based training to contribute to whole school approaches (including the broader community), and to classroom socio-educational approaches, as well as having the skills to work directly with individuals for eg to prevent and to manage bullying to reduce very serious consequences which can include suicide.

Educational and developmental psychologists also provide a broad range of direct assessment and intervention, and training services, regarding the learning, behavioral, social, communication and emotional needs of referred students. For example they provide diagnostic assessments in regard to students who have learning disabilities and work collaboratively with teachers and parents to develop individual programs to tackle specific literacy and numeracy challenges.

Taking a principled rather than a personal perspective regarding the school chaplaincy program, under - resourced schools understandably seek extra resources where they can to assist them to respond to the range of student needs indicated previously.

It is therefore not at all surprising that schools take the opportunity to get such resources through the chaplaincy program – despite the risks this may pose regarding the role being viewed as discriminatory (because all religious groups cannot be fairly represented therefore limiting access to some for religious reasons), and, more importantly, the fact that boundaries will inevitably be crossed (between the chaplaincy and psychology roles) thereby placing students at risk.

That is, chaplains cannot possibly avoid being in the position of at times offering what could be construed as professional psychology support or advice. Despite the very good people who may be employed as chaplains, from a principled perspective, this potentially puts students at risk through inappropriate advice or treatment and also places the chaplain in a potentially difficult and unfair position – particularly where referral processes may not be clear and/or

where access to local psychology or other health professional support may be not be readily available –such as in regional areas.

Naturally schools will manage their recruitment under such a program to attract skill sets that meet their needs eg carefully recruiting those who have teaching and or psychology qualifications.

Again, from a principled position, it makes much more sense to re-direct the chaplaincy funding to expand the numbers of educational and developmental psychologists because of their particular competencies, and to reduce/manage the risks as noted.

Some of those employed as chaplains may well be recruited as psychologists once their training is complete, hence building the workforce by ensuring more qualified educational and developmental psychologists are available.

It is critical that the role of educational and developmental psychologists is supported and its status raised ,at a time of high demand for such skills ,especially when the rate of retirement of such psychologists may be outstripping supply ,in part due to competing employment opportunities .

The looming risk for the longer term ,additional to the current risks noted above for all stakeholders, is that a well a intensioned program undermines building workforce capacity for the long term by not strengthening and expanding the vital role of educational and developmental psychologists who support the psychological care and well being of all students .

Thank you for your consideration of the points made.

Yours Sincerely  
Anthony Warren